

Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the gentlelady's courtesy in permitting me to speak on this rule and on this bill.

I further appreciate what this represents. It has been my privilege to serve for the last 10 years on the Water Resources Subcommittee for Transportation and Infrastructure. Over that period of time, I have watched as we have focused legislation to deal with the amazing needs that face water resources around the country.

Unfortunately, the legislation that we have passed through this House with strong support in recent Congresses has never been able to find its way into law. I think that with this legislation, we are able to find a way to help break the impasse.

I would like to speak to one of the elements that was in that legislation that has been made in order by the Rules Committee, an amendment that I am offering along with my colleagues Peter Welch and Tom Petri to help bring the Corps of Engineers into the 21st century by updating the principles and guidelines under which it operates.

Our amendment takes a step back from the politics and controversies that have surrounded the Corps' activities over recent years. In fact, there has been some finger-pointing at the Corps, but frankly, Congress itself is part of the problem and can be part of a process that can help move this forward.

These principles and guidelines are used for the formulation, evaluation, and implementation of water resources projects. The current rules under which the Corps operates have not been updated since 1983. It seems hard to believe, given how important water resources are and how much we have learned about the science, about hydrology since 1983.

Think about it for a moment. In 1983, Ronald Reagan was President. We were dealing with the movie "Return of the Jedi." A year later, the 3.5-inch floppy disk was introduced, and IBM was soon to launch the first portable computer which weighed 30 pounds. Half the people who work for me in my congressional office weren't even born in 1983.

Every Member of the House is aware how much has changed since 1983 in terms of technology, science, environmental policy, our national priorities, and our understanding of water resources. Yet, the Corps of Engineers and the thousands of dedicated men and women who work for them have a planning process that has not kept up.

It was my privilege with the former head of the Corps, General Flowers, to meet with representatives of all of the planning agencies for the Corps across the country. They understand the problems; they are striving to make some adjustments. We are still developing projects, yet they are still working under an umbrella that was based on principles and guidelines when James Watt was Secretary of the Interior.

This amendment is very simple. It directs the Secretary of the Army to update the principles and guidelines in consultation with all the other Federal agencies that have a stake in the process, to work with the public to deal with what we have learned over the last quarter of a century.

This is a very important step on addressing criticisms from the National Academy of Sciences, the OMB, the Government Accountability Office, and others. It does not impact any project that currently is approved or under way, none of the projects that are listed in the bill we have before us, but it is going to help us change the process to get at the root of a long-term problem.

Passing the amendment will not delay any projects or tie the hands of the Corps in any way. In fact, I am convinced that it will break the paralysis for projects in the future by making sure they are structurally, fiscally, and environmentally sound.

There are some projects around the country that have been delayed in recent years due not just to funding, although that is a serious issue, but due to lawsuits and other controversy. The ones that I have looked at that have met bumps in the road were in this situation in the main because they weren't properly planned and ground-truthed, as they say; and they have stirred up unnecessary controversy in some instances.

This amendment will make it easier to approve and construct good projects in the future. This amendment will make it easier for the House and the Senate, which in the past have been at loggerheads over principles of Corps reform. I think this is an area of common ground that will bring people together. This amendment represents a fresh break. It won't solve all of the problems of the Corps, that will await another day; but with this amendment, it gives us a chance at a new beginning for Congress to be positively involved in these issues.

We start by equipping the Corps with the latest science and analytic tools to bring them into the 21st century rather than tying their hands with out-of-date policies.

I strongly urge that each of my colleagues join with me in supporting our amendment, which is endorsed by Clean Water Action, Taxpayers for Commonsense, Republicans for Environmental Protection, the National Audubon Society, Friends of the Earth, American Rivers, the National Wildlife Federation, Environmental Defense, the League of Conservation Voters, the American Society of Civil Engineers, the people who are charged with making these projects work.

I deeply appreciate the progress that this represents in bringing us forward. I appreciate the Rules Committee making it in order, and look forward to being able to carry this amendment to the floor, hopefully for its approval, and being able to break the impasse surrounding water resources projects.

In the aftermath of the tragedy we saw with Hurricane Katrina, with the flooding that has occurred in the Northeast just in recent days, this legislation is more important than ever.